

DAV National Employment Award Winners



Judy L. Shurtleff

"This year's winners cut a swath right through middle America," said DAV National Employment Director Ronald W. Drach, whose department oversees the Annual National Employment Award Program. "Each individual and company who won, along with all the others nominated, are doing everything they can in terms of bettering employment opportunities for veterans and disabled people. That's what these awards are all about." They will receive their much-deserved recognition at the DAV National Convention in Reno, Nev., August 1 to 6, 1992.

The winners are:

DISABLED VETERAN OUTREACH PROGRAM (DVOP) SPECIALIST OF THE YEAR

Judy L. Shurtleff
Waukegan, Illinois

"Outstanding performance." "Compassionate." "Quite remarkable." These descriptions and other accolades were given to Judy L. Shurtleff of Waukegan, Ill., a Disabled Veteran Outreach Program (DVOP) Specialist at the Illinois Department of Employment Security (IDES).

Her career as a DVOP started at her first station at the North Chicago VA Medical Center. Although she now works out of the Waukegan office, she maintains a liaison with the hospital through a weekend job program she developed. On her own time, she finds the jobs, drives her own van, picks veterans up at the hospital, takes them to the weekend job, and delivers them back to the hospital.

Among her other duties, Shurtleff is also currently handling the Transition Assistance Program at Great Lakes Naval Training Center. In conjunction with the DAV and the IDES, she also coordinated the National Disability Awareness Poster Contest. She played a vital role in the development of and participation in a women veterans conference recently held



Eugene Ackerman

in Chicago. She also serves on the Illinois Attorney-General's Veterans Advisory Council.

For the past two years, Shurtleff has led the way in placements of disabled veterans. Last year she placed 237 veterans. One nominator described her achievement by citing that since there are about 222 work days in a year, and taking into account that she is frequently away from the office at military installations, placing 237 veterans is a remarkable achievement. Another nominator summed up Shurtleff's abilities by saying, "This nomination is made with the conviction that few have equalled her performance and no one exceeds her determination to help the veteran community."

LOCAL VETERANS' EMPLOYMENT REPRESENTATIVE (LVER) OF THE YEAR

Eugene Ackerman
Mandan, North Dakota

"Gene and his staff of the Mandan Office view service to disabled veterans as a total team effort," said one nominator of Eugene Ackerman, Local Veterans' Employment Representative, at the Mandan Job Service in North Dakota.

His first involvement in helping people began with his job as a claims examiner with the State Human Service Agency. After 15 years, in 1988 he took a break to open his own business, a pizzeria. But a couple of years later, in 1990, he was back to helping people through the Job Service in Mandan.

"It is evident that Gene Ackerman is very committed to assisting disabled veterans to become self-supporting through the provision of services such as counseling and training," said a supporter. And the numbers prove it. Every disabled veteran seeking assistance was provided service and 65 percent were placed in jobs. Thirty-nine percent were counseled,

which led to placements. Twenty-seven percent were placed as a result of job development calls.

Ackerman's nomination packet was filled with letters from grateful veterans, county officials, Native American reservation officials, and veterans' service organizations. A certificate presented to him from the Department of Veterans Affairs says it all, "Mr. Ackerman has excelled in the effective application of knowledge and technical expertise in assisting veterans."

LARGE EMPLOYER OF THE YEAR (200 OR MORE EMPLOYEES)

Fruehauf Trailer Corporation
Waverly, Ohio

"Keep on trucking" takes on new meaning when applied to the Fruehauf Trailer Corporation in Waverly, Ohio. Due to its active recruitment of veterans, the company has a lot of experienced employees doing their best to keep Fruehauf trailers on the road.

Out of 420 employees, 36 are disabled veterans. Last year, Fruehauf hired 8 disabled veterans, and 14 Vietnam Era veterans, showing a continuing commitment to employ veterans.

According to the Ohio Bureau of Employment Services, Fruehauf works closely with the Ohio Job Service to "develop maximum linkages to promote employment opportunities for, and provide maximum employment assistance to such veterans."

SMALL EMPLOYER OF THE YEAR (200 OR LESS EMPLOYEES)

Network Solutions, Incorporated
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

Network Solutions of Oklahoma City, Okla., solves its clients' telecommunications challenges by using a special mix of employees: women, older people, disabled, and veterans.

Network Solutions keeps its veteran connection fresh in a couple of ways. Not only are 56 of its 104 employees veterans, but Network Solutions also has several contracts with military installations around the country.

As an employer, Emmett J. McHenry, President of Network Solutions, explains one of the philosophies of his company: "The expertise and energy of our employees are our greatest assets. To remain an employer of choice, we offer employees fair and reasonable compensation; a clearly defined career development path; a role in the participative management of the company; and a commitment to view each employee as a whole person."

Terry Van Meter, his massive 6-foot-4-inch frame dwarfing his wheel chair, leans forward and begins to tell the story of how he lost the use of his legs during the Vietnam War. Some thirty minutes later, the DAV's Outstanding Disabled Veteran of 1992 gets to the part about realizing that his dream of being a career Army officer was over.

"Since I was 11 years old, I've felt that I was put on this earth to be a professional soldier," Van Meter, 49, said after trying to maintain his composure in his office at the U.S. Cavalry Museum at Fort Riley, Kan. "But when an Army doctor told me that I'd probably never walk again, I knew then and there that my soldiering days were over. I was devastated, I was angry, and I remember crying like a baby for more than an hour."

That time of devastation and anger occurred at the Valley Forge Army Hospital in Phoenixville, Pa., less than a year after he was hit three times during an August 28, 1968, fire fight near the village of Trang Bang in the Hobo Wood area of South Vietnam. Van Meter, a 25-year-old captain at the time, was the commander of B Company, Second Battalion, 506th Infantry. His unit, he says with genuine pride, was part of the 3rd Brigade of the 101st Airborne Division, the Army's famous "Screaming Eagles."

"One of my platoon leaders and his troops were sweeping through the woods when they ran into an unknown bunker complex with about a hundred North Vietnamese soldiers in it. Our guys got pinned down and after I ordered in flame throwers, I led another team in to knock out the bunker," said the DAV life member. "As we were going in, a bullet struck me in the neck and completely spun me around. The second bullet hit my spine, went through my spleen and lodged in my kidney. The third one hit me in the shoulder as I was going down."

Sprawled flat on his back, still shouting orders to his troops, Van Meter said he tried to turn on his side and move his legs but his battered body wouldn't cooperate. Relying on the faith he first knew as a young boy growing up in Sturgis, Mich., Van Meter turned to prayer for protection from the on-coming enemy.

"I just laid there, looked up to the heavens, and said, 'Father, if possible, try to get me out of here.' Almost instantly, the most unbelievable calmness came over me and I knew things were going to turn out okay," he said. "It was the most serene feeling I've ever had in my life and one I'll never forget."

As the skirmish raged on, Van Meter blacked out twice before he was airlifted

One Soldier's Story

Terry Van Meter Named DAV's
Outstanding Disabled Veteran of the Year



to Cu Chi Army Field Hospital. On his way to Cu Chi, his troops radioed battalion headquarters and reported him dead because they were sure he couldn't survive the wounds.

A TALE OF TWO CHOICES

After being stabilized at Cu Chi, Van Meter was flown to Long Binh Army Hospital where doctors performed what he terms "a major medical miracle." One of his first memories at Long Binh, nearly 10 days after being wounded, was waking up to see Vic Morrow starring in "Combat" on the television set in his ward. Somehow, he suggests, that seemed appropriate for a young man who grew up studying the careers of Generals George Patton and Erwin Rommel and who graduated in 1966 from Norwich University, a private military academy in Vermont.

Van Meter recalls that his parents received a two-page telegram from the Army shortly after he arrived at Long Binh. "The Army was pretty frank with my parents and, in essence, told mom and dad not to hold their breath waiting for me to come home because I probably wasn't going to live," he says of the faded telegram that is now one of his most prized possessions. "The whole time I was at Long Binh, they kept me in one of the four beds closest to the nursing station. At first I thought that was kind of nice, but I later learned that those beds were reserved for the guys they didn't expect to make it home."

Despite being given up for dead on three separate occasions, Van Meter finally made it back to the United States. And, he says, he brought with him a renewed sense of faith and a determination to put the pieces of his life back together.

"After I got to the Valley Forge Army Hospital, I figured my injuries were only temporary and I refused to accept the fact that I was a paraplegic," Van Meter said. "Man wasn't put on this earth to be in a wheelchair and I just thought that if I worked hard enough, the legs would come around sooner or later."

"I also quickly figured out that I basically now had two choices in life. I could sit around and feel sorry for myself or I could pick up the pieces and go on with my life," he said. "Through the grace of God, and with the full support of my family, I chose to pick up the pieces and move forward."

PICKING UP THE PIECES

While at Valley Forge, Van Meter says "the number one positive thing" that came about from his war injuries was meeting his future wife, Jacquie, an Army nurse. After they got engaged, Jacquie received

orders to report for duty in Vietnam. Through an ironic twist of fate, her first day in Vietnam was August 28, 1969 — exactly one year to the day that her fiancée was injured near Hobo Wood.

Before she left for Vietnam, Van Meter had promised Jacquie that he'd walk her down the aisle on their wedding day. With aid of braces and crutches, Van Meter kept his promise and on Oct. 22, 1970, walked Jacquie down the aisle of the Main Post Chapel at Fort Devens, Mass. The Van Meters are now the proud parents of two children. Andy will be a senior at Manhattan High School this fall and is considering West Point and Kansas State University following graduation. Their daughter Renee will be entering the seventh grade.

While recuperating in the West Roxbury, Mass., VA Medical Center spinal cord injury unit, Van Meter paid a visit to a former professor at Norwich University to talk about old times. Eventually the conversation turned to the future. Van Meter told Col. Frank Sargent that he planned to use his VA vocational rehabilitation training to get a master's degree in business and then build a career with a large company.

"But just like he used to do when I was his student, Colonel Sargent challenged me to rethink my options and consider doing something with my love for history," Van Meter said. "The more I thought about it, the more Colonel Sargent made sense. I decided that if I couldn't make military history, then I surely could help preserve it."

"All I've ever asked for since I've been disabled is a chance to do a job and to be promoted based on my ability, not on my disability."

A MATTER OF HISTORY

After applying to several schools that offered a master's degree in military history, Van Meter and his wife packed up their belongings and headed to Manhattan, Kan., where he enrolled at Kansas State University. While earning his degree, Van Meter worked as a volunteer at the U.S. Cavalry Museum at nearby Fort Riley.

"I just loved working with military history and knew that this was going to be my new career. In 1976, they hired me as a museum specialist and three years later I became the museum's director and curator," Van Meter said. "I've really been fortunate to work in a place where I get such great support from the commanding general and the entire museum staff."

While employed by the Army, Van Meter has been credited with turning the U.S. Cavalry Museum from an artifact storage area into a first-class museum that now attracts nearly 80,000 visitors a year. In 1987, he was selected as the U.S. Army's Handicapped Person of the Year and named one of the Top Ten Federal Handicapped Employees of Year.

Two years ago he was promoted to his current position as Chief of the Museum Division at Fort Riley, overseeing both the U.S. Cavalry Museum and the 1st Infantry Division Museum. The latter museum was started from scratch and opened June 8, the 75th anniversary of the "Big Red One."

Asked how he felt when notified of his selection as the DAV's Outstanding Disabled Veteran of 1992, Van Meter said he was really surprised and very humbled. He said he was also honored that the members of DAV Pearl Harbor Chapter 16 in Junction City, Kan., submitted him for the award.

"When good fortune and recognition come my way, I realize that I'm representing a lot of other people with disabilities and it makes me feel good to show people without disabilities that we're just like them and can do anything," Van Meter said.

"I don't really have a disability problem, but I do have a transportation problem. All I've ever asked for since I've been disabled is a chance to do a job and to be promoted based on my ability, not on my disability."

DAV National Employment Director Ronald W. Drach said that the DAV was proud to recognize someone of Van Meter's courage and dedication. "Terry Van Meter is a classic example of someone who has worked extremely hard to triumph over tragedy," Drach said. "He may no longer be wearing the Army green, but he is still certainly a leader and someone that we can all admire and applaud."